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ABSTRACT

In fall 1978, Sacramento City College initiated the Higher Education Learning Package (HELP) to promote the success and retention of students with basic skill deficiencies while mainstreaming them into regular courses. Students work with instructors and tutors in small groups and on a one-to-one basis. Using an integrative team teaching approach, instruction builds on student experience, and progress is measured in terms of established competency criteria. Students commit themselves to a two-package one-year program, taking one package each semester. Package 1 consists of English (written communication skills), psychology (personal relations), mathematics (basic arithmetic), and developmental reading. Package 2 consists of speech (oral communication skills), social science (American institutions), and human development (basic college skills such as note-taking and career planning). By the end of the year students should have completed 24 units towards an associate of arts degree. During the first year, attrition among the two groups of 39 and 45 students each was approximately 25% and 22% respectively. External factors, over which the college had no control, were responsible for many students leaving the program. Another factor influencing attrition was that many students entered the program with skills below the sixth grade level around which the program was designed. (MB)

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A Pilot Program For Community College High-Risk Students

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H E L P

A Pilot Program For Community College High-Risk Students

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Sacramento City College has initiated a pilot program called HELP (Higher Education Learning Package) in the Fall of 1978. The program goal is to assist high risk students with basic skills deficiencies in achieving their educational goals. 'What we are attempting to do," say the coordinators, "is to integrate basic skills instruction and content instruction." Eighty-seven students and eight instructors are participating in the first year of the program.

Past experience (as well as numerous studies) has shown that remedial instruction as a separate component, a kind of preparation stage before beginning college-work, is inefficient and does little either for motivation or retention of students. It might be that students either do not see the relationship of remedial courses to their educational goals or they do not see the relationship of improving basic skills competencies to success in college course work. Furthermore, most remedial programs approximate development as progressing through segmented stages or steps. The typical high risk student, alien in such conventional systems of logical, linear processing, faces more failure if offered more of the same. In the HELP program, students with skills deficiencies are linked and associated rather than segmented. We theorize that in a multi-dimensional environment structured to provide practice in missing skills and based on personal

needs high risk students can process information. The goals of Project HELP are, therefore: (a) to promote retention by building into the courses those tasks which address attitudinal changes as well as cognitive development; (b) to promote success by providing the needed learning support; and (c) to mainstream high risk students into regular college courses. This last point is particularly unique since with few exceptions instructional programs for disadvantaged students have developed separately and have not affected general college offerings.

HELP is a team--students work with instructors and tutors in small-group learning situations and on a one-to-one basis. Instructors work together from integrated themes, units and competency criteria. Instruction builds on student experience and progess is measured in terms of established competency criteria. HELP is based on an integrative team teaching approach. The goal is to create a unified learning environment for the student, linking teacher and counselor roles, course content and basic skills, and courses in a package.

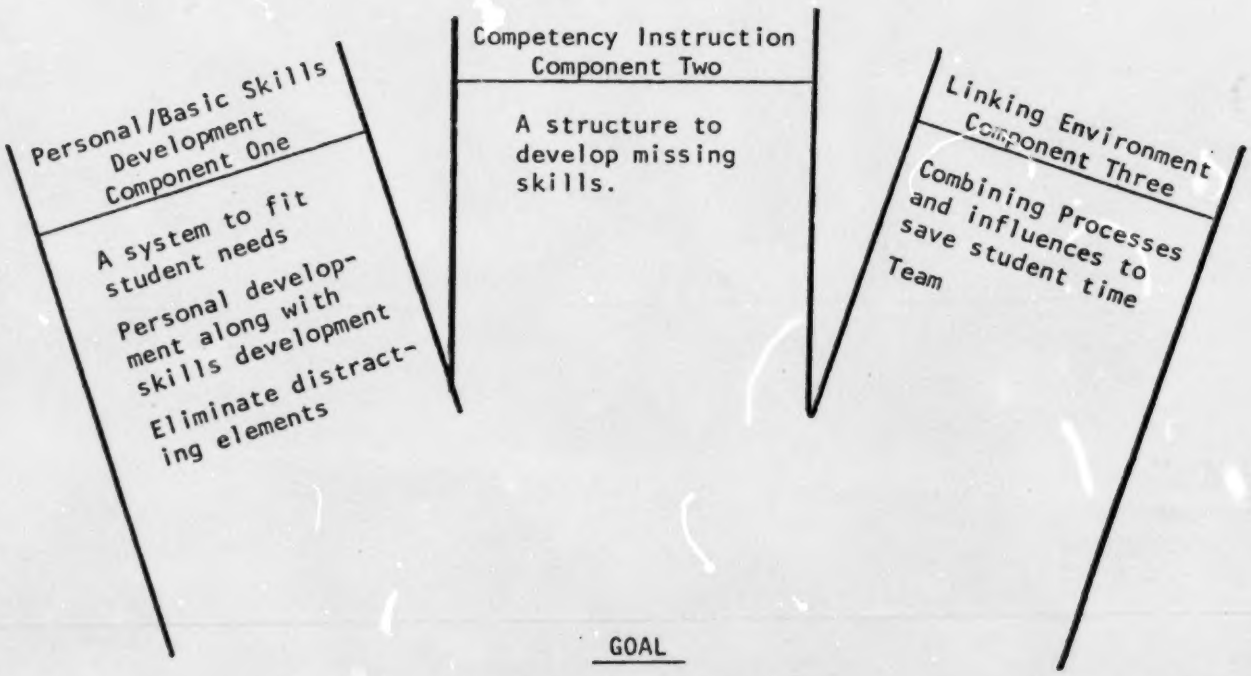
In order to qualify for the program, students must be assessed as to reading abilities. Cut-off scores on a standardized test, indicating reading levels of 6-9th grade, were determined as a result of collected data on EOPS (Educational Opportunities Program/Services) candidates. This data showed that students who tested within this range could succeed provided that a helping learning environment was provided.

In Project HELP students commit themselves to a two package one-year program, one package each semester. Package one consists of English (written communication skills), Psychology (Personal Relations), Math (Basic Arithmetic) and Developmental Reading. Package two consists of

Speech (Oral Communication Skills), Social Science (American Institutions), Human Development (skills needed for success in college; e.g. listening, note-taking, career planning, and so on). At the end of the year, it is expected that students will have completed 24 units toward an A.A. degree and will be prepared to embark on a major leading to a two-year or a four-year goal.

The following diagram describes the three key components making up the HELP program:

Key Components - HELP Program



Because of difficulties in launching the program in the fall semester 1978, current efforts have focused mainly on problem solving. However, a program evaluation model designed by a team of consultants has been implemented. The model with its four parts--descriptive information and projected time-lines--is outlined below:

Program Evaluation Model

Program Evaluation Process	Timeline for 18 Week Session
1. Use of teacher made questionnaire to describe student and instructor perceptions. Categories of information include: - information that we expected to appear in student responses - information that we did not expect to appear in student responses - instructors' reactions to student responses - measures or indicators of success according to students and instructors - measures or indicators of success in each competency area - program problems	Week 7
2. Review and monitoring of attrition rate	Week 7
3. Student sign-up for next semester of program	Week 16
4. Catalog of student responses about courses	Continuous

At this time, the HELP students reflect such a wide range of life and learning experiences as well as basic skills abilities, particularly in the areas of reading and writing, that an identification of some of these differences can provide instructional direction.

A sample of reading data from Team Two (Speech, Social Science, Human Development) shows some of the variability in basic skills abilities:

- of twenty-seven (27) active students, fifteen (15) are reading above the 6th grade level
- of the twelve (12) students reading below grade 6, three (3) have shown some improvement, five (5) may be learning disabled and thus not able to respond to teaching structures, and three (3) have English language deficiencies.

Little qualitative data is now available but it includes the information on reading and on attrition.

Conclusions

Attrition rate

Attrition rates - Team Two

- 39 students attended one time or more
- by week 7, 27 students were attending regularly
- 12 students were lost by attrition (approximately 25 percent)

Attrition rates - Team One

- 45 students attended one time or more
- by week 7, 35 were attending regularly
- 10 students were lost by attrition (approximately 22 percent)

Since one of the key variables being reviewed in Project HELP is attrition rate, one must be aware of the influence of the many problems that students brought with them to the program. For example, both teams have a large number of ex-offenders, single parents, and disadvantaged students. These external factors, over which the college has no control,

are being addressed through the supportive environment of the team structure; however, we conclude that those students who enrolled without extreme external problems are remaining. Those who left the program did so because:

(a) the financial incentives for attending college are not sufficient;

(b) the personal environment of the students is not supportive of the educational commitment (for example, one husband will not permit his wife to continue).

While it is not the intent of Project HELP to compensate for so many negative variables, much effort is being devoted to encouraging students to stay in the program. Some of the noticeable successes of the Team in fighting the attrition battle are:

(a) one student dropped out of an outlaw motorcycle group as a result of the Project influence;

(b) behavior is being modified so that students do work more harmoniously in group situations;

(c) the learning disabled are being identified and individual assessment is being provided for them;

(d) some instructors are making home visits to students;

(e) some instructors are meeting students out of class for tutorial sessions.

One other major factor affecting the attrition rate is the target student group. Project HELP was designed for those reading above 6th grade level. However, a large percentage of the students, particularly in Team Two, were admitted not meeting this prerequisite. The result has been that time and energy is being diverted to bringing these students to a working level, an impossible task in some instances. In the future, we need to be

more diligent in maintaining the prerequisite learning skills and abilities to progress and in staying within our described parameters of which high-risk students can succeed in the college environment.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is emerging as the missing skill or competency for students with basic skills deficiencies. This information may be of use in considering how to assist the entire institution to deal with high risk, basic skills deficient students. Continuing and more intensive staff development in increasing vocabulary emphasis in instruction might be one desired result of this information.

The success of the team approach. Discernible successes of the team approach are appearing in student and instructor perceptions. The team approach might begin to be considered as a process and methodology for expanded institutional use, because it seems to be providing an environment for faculty growth, exchange of ideas and the breaking down of traditional discipline structure and compartmentalization.

Problems with the team approach. The team approach does require more time and energy than conventional course structures. If we accept the student and instructor reports that this structure not only assist students with learning problems, but also instructors with staff development and growth, then the institution must provide the adjusted FTE needed by instructors to perform within these multiple communication parameters--60% of their teaching time to the HELP program and 40% to conventional instructional assignments. Such an assignment would permit instructors to use Monday, Wednesday, Friday for the HELP program: teaching, program preparation, and more intensive counseling. While it is premature to draw

firm conclusions, some indicators are that without this institutional support and rewards, the instructors cannot maintain the commitment and energy level required for Project HELP.

Where does the program go from here? Because of the difficulties in launching the program in the fall semester, (recruitment, assessment, orientation) efforts have focused mainly on problem solving. The focus of the second semester, Spring 1979, will be on evaluation and on communicating the results of Project HELP to the entire institution. By Fall, 1979, we should be in a position to consider recommendations for expansion of the program in Spring, 1980.

Program Results. Component One of Project HELP, providing a system to fit the students' needs, is reflecting more success in developing interpersonal skills than originally anticipated. Student attitudes about learning and the college are approaching a high level of confidence as indicated in the Progress Review Study completed by students in October, 1978.

Component Two, providing a structure to develop missing skills through competency system is progressing but the students are functioning generally at the lowest level of the competencies rather than at the higher levels. With the sense of confidence now established for the learner, we theorize that more gains in the competencies will be possible. Much more work in describing and measuring specific learning tasks needs to be done.

Component Three, combining processes and influences to concentrate the students' energy on learning seems to be contributing to the students' sense of security and to the success steps already discernible within the competencies.

Project HELP will continue to be evaluated and definitive data is expected to be available at the end of the Spring Semester, 1979. Program Coordinator is Dr. Dorothy H. Bohr, Associate Dean of Instruction at Sacramento City College. Curriculum and Design Coordinator is Dr. Dorothy Bray, Assistant Dean, Languages and Literature Division at Sacramento City College.

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